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Poet's corner

Selected Poems

Ralph Pite

Pite's poetical debut dates back to 2003: his first book is *Paths and Ladders*, a collection of twentyseven free verse texts. According to Adam Piette his poetry witnesses «a devious clarity, probing ordinary encounters and daily anxieties. With quiet strength they retranscribe Romantic concerns, with ecology and the metamorphoses of the self».¹

In 2014 a selection of eight poems from *Dantesca* and *Petrarchesca* (two autonomous collections of texts inspired by works of Dante and Petrarch) was published in the quarterly «Lo stato delle cose».² All these poems had an original «double poetical layout»: the first line offered a literary opening, in form of title-quotation of Italian verses from Petrarch's sonnets and brief passages from Dante's *Inferno* which inspired the English author, soon after followed by Pite's new lyrics. His scholarly background seems to be predominantly literary, clearly expressed through the usage of a peculiar language and a proper style: into the framework of his narrative poetry Pites

¹ Ralph Pite, *Paths and Ladders*, Liverpool, The Brodie Press, 2003, p. 7. A selection of poems from *Paths and Ladders* was published in the literary magazine *Lyceum* (May, 2008) with an italian translation by Vincenzo Salerno.

² Ralph Pite, *Petrarchesca*, *Dantesca*, edited by Vincenzo Salerno, in «Lo stato delle cose», III, (21), Milano, Oèdipus, 2014, pp. 48-75. Vincenzo Salerno added Italian translations to the English poems.

writes fragments or longer poems, uses alliterative and onomatopoeic verses often linked in an *enjambement* strophe-structure. On the other side, the frequent appearance of the «I speaking voice» confirms the weight of the autobiographical element, thus also offering a space to the reader who «can always make contact with an authorial presence, unobtrusive and often almost transparent, but nonetheless answerable» (Roy Fisher).

In 2017 six poems (written during Pite's visits in Rome in the late eighties and thereafter) were collected under the title *Vacanze romane* in «Testo a fronte».³ Midway between the poetical journal of a 19th century English Grand Tourist and the written jottings of a young foreign student in his twenties, it could be considered as a sort of poetical translation of a Roman journey along the streets of the city center, the vestiges of its archeological sites, the perspectives of its «natural» and modern landscape. This concise anthology of a young poet already contains all the themes and the stylistic aspects which would have been developed in the author's later works. Since 2003 Ralph Pite continues publishing his poems in various British literary magazines: *The Rialto*, *English*, *The Reader*, *Bristol Review of Books*, *The Clearing*.

From *Paths and Ladders*

Literary Modernism

‘Vulgar’, said Rilke,
travelling through the Alps
by train. ‘Please
do draw the blind and hide that
hideous scenery’.

He more enjoyed
the tunnels’ clamour
which racketed first-hand
the lunging sparks
jungling dynamited rock.

Crowd

All separately avoiding, so you miss
and cross and interweave perpetual

³ Ralph Pite, *Vacanze Romane*, edited by Vincenzo Salerno, in «Testo a fronte», n. 57, Milano, Marcos y Marcos, 2017, pp. 157-71. Vincenzo Salerno added Italian translations to the English poems.

adjustments, holdings back, I don't notice,
just walking along until I almost crash or stall

at sudden obstacles. It's then you see the texture
stretched in all directions and tiny gaps
bubbling away. No other mess or heap
remotely intricate as this one is.

From *Dantesca*

A veder surto
(*Inferno* 26)

Feet jabbering 'foothold, toehold' – if
just a join-line routed out on render --
least thing to scrabble from
and clinging to parapet spy out latest pit,
take in issued glowsticks like mobiles like
lighters waved aloft through encore power-ballad
or fireflies' mineral shimmer
in abandoned orchard's shadowy arcades

in which is found today's
daily offering of informed opinion
and while staring them out could slip
so grab both chair-arms tight
slow settle slow secure – since never sure
who is walking smoothly down
centro storico's high-walled moonlit lane –
people whoever about their skippety errands.

As they pass, figures in the shopfront glass
these flexuous shades, pour scorn on their reckless
claims, on wild nothings just as they design
(since avarice lacks intent beyond itself)
and just as they draw
off now like battleships making smoke:
oil-gusher black,
the billowing dreams of apologia.

Alberigo

'levatemi dal viso i duri veli'
(Inferno 33, 112)

'So please, I beg of you, prise
this eye-mask away of time-freezing tears
that seep like secrets into bone-flaws.'

A passer-by can't help or fears to,
leaves that trial well alone
as he hunts the devil down in himself

against the blistering wind, its drain-
like, personal smell across the lake.
And toiling of course he loathes my moan.

Beneath his weight it didn't seem fake
for once, the ice. Through fish-eye lenses
of obligatory weeping I watched

his going away, in blind indifference
to how I too survive and feel,
how off collusive guard I trace

autumn's amber into pale
gold and crimson then brown – and hope
for a moment's sleep before the real

wakefulness – waiting for day to peep
its clinical first light through feeble cloud.
Where am I this moment, up

and rowdy in the streets, unworried
where I am? I know my body's
somewhere alive but do not live.

And don't endure the dead soul's tortures
as an infinite instant of pain
or paralysis in the prison of this

bare ice. To be among the damned
at last will be worse of course
in a distinctive way I can't divine;

and envy of their stasis is

my current punishment – I'm aware,
painfully aware, of that. I preserve

my pointless grasp of how the law
applies to me – that is, to my case.
Being as an instance is

my nearest approach to self – the curb
on my becoming lost to agonies,
and so itself agony, a poor

prosaic substitute for the given,
brutal and total suffering
they presently undergo, which

they are. If treachery – my sin –
is a breach in hospitality (I don't
admit it is, but it has been so defined)

if it is a lack of warmth, the intent
to keep separate hand and heart
then clearly this is appropriate torment

right now – the heartless body at large,
the homeless soul in an alien prison.
Any fool can see or say that.

And matter's not moved by soul, as an aspen
leaf that accepts the air – the opposite,
because I will be bathed a moment's

fraction in body at its death,
warmth surge through my spider veins,
its heat grip my heart, grip

until I gasp and let re-enter
these surroundings' vacuum cold,
betrayal's solitude in which

we'll cling to each other, body and soul.
Meanwhile, this curled-up present languishing
seems void to those earnest, pedestrian fools!

He knows I envy him his being

an entire self without condition.
That ratchets up the pressure – bound to –

which he hates – on his response
so he falters, finds a moral reason
not to keep his promise to relieve

the ingrowing torture I endure,
in return betrayal to avoid contagion.
And then how loyally his partner

shepherded him away without a sound –
his luridly saintly spirit-guide,
in partisan benevolence.

Yet not yet to be again
and never to be – because it is
deception, this prospect of reunion

with myself in death – because justice
I realise must betray the traitor
– because my lack of mercy asked this

just reward – are worse than all their
venturing on pain to win
self-repossession, far

worse: he's never lost what now again
and again, round by round, he seeks,
led down here by his wearisome friend:

his mind; whereas the slightest of creaks
like the ones he makes in this hard,
self-important wilderness

is my body at last falling into my arms.

From *Petrarchesca*

‘Dolci ire, dolci sdegni e dolci paci’

I can make myself enjoy
temperament and disaster,

flare-ups, peace
and tension, moods.

‘Still you agonise.
“Suffer and be still” applies
differently now.
Feel affectionate and wait.’

It is purgatory.
Who possesses what he cannot love?

‘Think of those who love
envying you your sorrow
saying, “Look at him,
his sufferings
deserved some joy.”

Think of others you left behind.’

‘D’un bel chiaro polito et vivo ghiaccio’

The visitors’ car-park:
laminated screen
and polished,
slippery ledge of
close-cropped grass.

Banal, actual smells
– sheep, petrol –
patchy litter-sprawl,
a view

with images ingrained –
thunder-shadowed
main-drag, car-chase
longdrawn-out
and feral dogs
glistening under intersection lights.

Can I honestly imagine
a last-minute
change of mind,
the effectively

inevitable reprieve?

Ignition, throttle, choke.
The bonnet launching
into
downward slopes.

What my wariness accepts.

From *Vacanze romane*

Testaccio

Behind the apartment the remains of an aqueduct:
its stones held together by moss, tough grass,
what look like buttercups;
the walls blackened, the uneven top-surface
smooth, as if it's melted and re-congealed.

Bright green parakeets glide beneath the few still open arches.

Late at night a tropical downpour; wind bashing the lamps
suspended down the centre of the street,
their light rolling up and down the buildings
drunkenly either side. A sea-freshness
when I go out – at moments, in gusts at turnings.

Both nights as I'm drifting off a voice says, this will finish, you will stop.

San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane

Borromini's youthful masterpiece, his squirming self-assertion.
An ellipse that tightens so entablature and pediment
And dome above the apse are each one squeezed and you feel pressed
Up into the cupola, up into the lantern
And forced through that narrow gate to the realms above.

The crypt has been reopened; it repeats the ground-plan of the church
And so exactly, it creates a ghost, shadowing the absence
Of the structure itself. Lack of decoration makes opulence elsewhere
Look precious and extreme; yet despite austerity, surprisingly,
It seems impure: the death from which the body, the building has been
raised.

It does not offer a mathematical revelation
Of the design's inner, secret harmonies, but because instead
Reformation and Counter-reformation stretch and curl the stones
Of the façade, down here this musty cellar, too empty and too wide
Betrays the Gothic underworld suspected of pulling the strings.

Adjoining is the cloister, another mirror, a different
Form of contrast in its plainness – in its pairs of Doric pillars,
The gentle curve of each internal corner, Roman-looking paving
And sea-green black of the flooring around the leaded well,
Which seems a bell-tower set down and settled in the earth.

Parco Caffarella, Parco Regionale dell'Appia Antica

It was me – down there,
closer than
is now accessible – that
twenty-something young man

gazing at the nymph
(luckily
discovered), and up through ivy
spilling down – which they've cleared.

A city park: on signs
'Siete Qui'
where joggers pass. The lizards
freeze on walls, unperturbed

and brilliant; small birds
shriek to their hearts'
content and butterflies are
flickering through the weeds.

